

Futilitarian

By

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I believe that none of our reactions to the body can be interpreted as natural or eternal, the way we experience our embodied selves changes with time and technology. My installation, *Futilitarian*, explores the conceptualization of the body as a factory. In particular it focuses on bodily cycles related to human reproduction and presents them as absurd parodies of industrial production.

I am both deeply repulsed and fascinated by the basic details of the embodied experience. The awareness that inside my skin are things uncontrollable and unknowable unsettles me. Western culture is permeated with the idea of *homo clauses*, the self in a case/container, a model in which the body's impulses and secretions can and should be contained. The ideal body that is tight, solid, and impenetrable is frustrated by a lived reality of porous, viscous, and unstoppable seepage. In Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection, the boundary of the body and the distinction between the self and that which is not the self is established through the process of repulsion. A sense of self and body image can only be reached by defining and purging that which is not acceptable as the self, the abject. As Gail Weiss observes:

Abjection is necessary because some aspects of our corporeal experience must be excluded to enable the coherent construction of both the ego and the body image, but it is also impossible because, as Grosz, Butler, and Kristeva all suggest, that which is excluded is not eliminated altogether but continually "erupts" and therefore disrupts the privileged sites of inclusion.¹

While the abject often refers to things like excrement, mucus, blood, urine, and pus, it can also include any element that threatens the body image's integrity such as obesity, illness, or pregnancy. The boundaries of the body are insecure and thus require careful regulation and

¹ Gail Weiss, *Body Images: Embodiment as Intercorporeality* (London: Routledge, 1999), 90.

repression. In this way bodies are not safe containers rather they are experienced as something of a continuous struggle to define what is acceptable as part of the body image through the refusal of that which is not. Elizabeth Grosz explains that bodily fluids:

Affront a subject's aspiration towards autonomy and self-identity. They attest to a certain irreducible "dirt" or disgust, a horror of the unknown or the unspecifiable that permeates, lurks, lingers, and at times leaks out of the body, a testimony of the fraudulence and impossibility of the "clean" and the "proper."²

An element of crisis or internal menace is also present in Susan's Bordo's examination of the slender body in *Unbearable Weight*. Bordo states:

I want to consider [images of unwanted bulges and erupting stomachs] as a metaphor for anxiety about internal processes out of control--uncontained desire, unrestrained hunger, uncontrolled impulse. Images of bodily eruption frequently function symbolically in this way in contemporary horror movies and werewolf films ...In Cronenberg's *Fly*, as in the werewolf genre, a new, alien, libidinous, and uncontrollable self literally bursts through the seams of the victim's old flesh.³

Increasingly, the degree to which a body appears firm and carefully regulated has become linked with perceptions of the emotional, moral, or spiritual state of the individual.⁴ Bordo briefly mentions the parasitic creature from the film *Alien* which gestates in, and erupts from the torso of a human host. This frequently copied image has obvious relations to the horrifically distended belly of a pregnant woman. If ripples of cellulite and flabby stomachs produce concern about internal processes, it is nothing to the anxiety I feel over my inability to fully control reproductive cycles.

² Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Towards a Corporeal Feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 194.

³ Susan Bordo, *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 189.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 193.

With puberty comes the onset of an entirely new collection of strange, confusing, and even painful things of which the body is capable. For females it is less a signal of approaching sexual agency than of an entry into reproductive realities. Elizabeth Grosz states:

Menstruation, associated as it is with blood, with injury and the wound, with a mess that does not dry invisibly, that leaks, uncontrollable, not in sleep, in dreams, but whenever it occurs, indicates the beginning of an out-of-control status that [the girl] was led to believe ends with childhood.⁵

Menstrual blood, developing breasts and a host of smaller changes are the external evidence of internal processes, the tip of an iceberg whose true bulk we cannot fully discern through the murky, churning fluid. These concealed bodily functions are the subject of my current creative research. My interests include: what the body produces, how that manufacturing may be represented, and to what extent my personal preoccupations are symptoms of social or cultural expectations.

My thesis work began in earnest with an early project I created based on the post-industrial revolution idea of the body as a factory that was expected to function efficiently (figures 1 and 2). I approached the piece by focusing on the reality that factories exist to generate a product while I also considered what the body actually produces. My conclusions were that babies and milk are the only bodily products that we do not instantly discard. Both of these occur in the cycle of human reproduction, and I find them to be disgusting perhaps as a result of their context as that which seeps or emerges from the body (the abject). The piece, titled *Production*, was intended to suggest the possibility of a body that produced something we could actually use on a regular basis. I chose bread as the product due to its symbolic identifications with bodies (Body of Christ, daily sustenance) and its status as one of the most

⁵ Grosz, 205.

basic manufactured foods. I intend the piece to explore whether the bread would be perceived as contaminated as a result of its physical proximity and association with the body. Any viewer could easily see the bread erupting from an anus-like orifice. Even an immaculate sphincter is seen as dirty, and in my work it marks the liminal stage of the finished product: bread. Although the focus of my work shifted away from usable products (such as bread) the approach I used in *Production* fueled my thesis exhibition.

The installation, *Futilitarian*, is intended to draw a comparison between human reproductive cycles and industrial production (figures 3 and 4). The work represents my imagination of the function and composition of the body interior. Just as I have a very limited understanding of the persistent operations of the human body, my work presents various “organs” and tubes that manufacture products with no apparent purpose.

One of the primary concerns of *Futilitarian* is the lack of control over our own bodily functions. We did not build the factory. We did not decide what it would produce. The body factory blissfully churns out products that (to someone not trying to reproduce) are completely useless and merely accumulate unused and unwanted on the floor, a supply with no demand (figures 5, 6, and 7). If we chose to, we could intervene; the delicate strings that hold up the organs could easily be clipped. But all of the systems are interconnected, even those beyond the walls and ceiling that we are not privy to; any interference might throw the entire body into a state of trauma.

I used the 30 foot high ceiling of the KU Art & Design Gallery to allow me to evoke the large scale and seeming pandemonium of a factory intended for continuous production. Because the distance between the viewer and the ceiling is mandatory (there are no steps available, so we

cannot actually walk closer to the ceiling), I wanted to situate a large element near the top of the installation. I looked to various sources for inspiration including foundry equipment, farm machinery, and the Dr. Seuss-esque water heater in the basement of my apartment building. Overall the exhibition is created from three basic forms: tubes, bladders, and funnels. I placed a large, ten foot diameter funnel at the top of the installation (figures 8 and 9) to imply that the system continues in the space beyond our view.

I am well aware that my reactions of disgust, embarrassment, and guilty fascination with the body are so extreme that they border on ridiculous. Consequently I emphasize the absurd, theatrical side of the work. My three primary influences are Eva Hesse, Terry Gilliam, and Theodor Geisel (“Dr. Seuss”). In speaking of her work Hesse claimed, “Absurdity is the key word....It has to do with contradictions and oppositions.”⁶ Hesse generally used the juxtaposition of physically unlike forms to achieve the absurd in her own work. I approach “absurdity” by placing things out of an expected context. For example, the surfaces of my pieces are texturally intricate, sometimes even beautiful. They contain fine silks (figure 10), laces (figure 11), and velvets (figure 12) which enhance their alluringly tactile quality. Additionally, I expanded my palette to include rich reds, greens, yellows, and purples. Yet, when you step back, that surface creates what appears to be a large intestine. It is a bit ridiculous that something repulsive would be made from such sensuous materials.

Futilitarian was created predominantly from handmade felt. My technique uses un-spun, hand-dyed wool to build hollow three-dimensional forms. The loose wool is laid out to cover a flat resist, wet down, entangled, and compacted until it transforms into a solid, sturdy felt.

⁶ Elissa Auther, *String, Felt, Thread: The Hierarchy of Art and Craft in American Art* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), 73.

Midway through the compacting or shrinking process I remove the resist and open the form up to avoid felting-in permanent seams. After the piece has shrunk approximately 30 percent, I either stuff it with fiberfill or shape it over a solid mold. The technique is much like constructing a skin or container and this nuance of the process had an important impact on my approach to the forms. While the overall effect of the installation is that of a body's interior, many individual parts reference recognizable portions of a body's exterior (figures 13, 14, and 15). In this way I hope to present viewers with a combination of the strange and the familiar. This is particularly true of several of the orifices in the piece. In these areas the uncertainty between inside and outside is magnified, just as orifices act as uncertain thresholds on/in the body.

In addition to felt, the installation includes many found industrial objects, such as parts of cars, pipes, and pulleys. These elements reference utility and functionality and thus relate to the idea of the industrial, and the factory. In some cases the found machine parts fit the felted body pieces like restrictive clothing, cinching and controlling a body that teeters on the brink of chaos. Forms that imply objects being squeezed through tubes too small for the task (figures 16 and 17) or bulbous organs being channeled by funnels (figures 18 and 19) are powerfully visceral for me. They instantly relate to bodily experiences, from excretion to the experience of squeezing into last year's jeans and becoming aware that my body has changed without notice. In this way, the industrial parts add another layer that speaks of the body and attempted control.

Futilitarian represents an undesired and incomplete reproductive cycle. Its large scale, tangling intestinal forms, and piles of wasted product all contribute to the theme of an uncontrollable body. After months of watching the piece develop, breed (figuratively), and steadily take over my studio, witnessing it installed was like seeing a new piece. It was no

longer haphazardly placed parts, but a whole with its own peculiar logic. The typical viewer reaction was to immediately look up and hesitate upon encountering its vertical expanse, before cautiously entering the piece's space to investigate particular details (figure 20). While I doubt this initial uncertainty was the result of any true repulsion, the piece's confrontational size did seem to induce some apprehension. The attraction of the piece, however, was undeniable, as passersby were frequently drawn into the installation. In my future work I hope to enhance the viewer's experience by including elements of sound, smell, and motion.

Works Cited

- Author, Elissa. *String, Felt, Thread: The Hierarchy of Art and Craft in American Art*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010.
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Illustrations



Figure 1.



Figure 2.



Figure 3.



Figure 4.



Figure 5.



Figure 6.



Figure 7.



Figure 8.

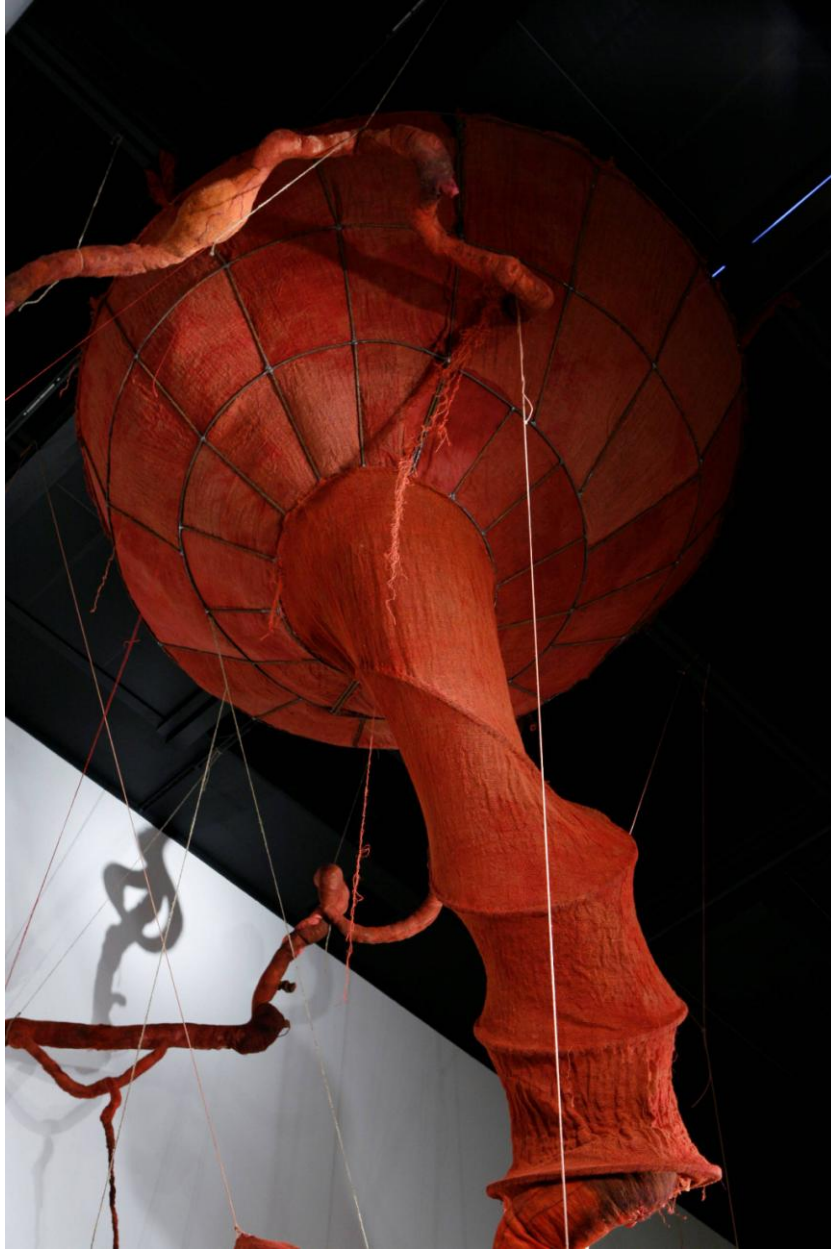


Figure 9.



Figure 10.



Figure 11.



Figure 12.



Figure 13.



Figure 14.



Figure 15.



Figure 16.



Figure 17.



Figure 18.



Figure 19.



Figure 20.